Las Conchas Wildfire – 2011

- Background: The fire started southwest of Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) and traveled in a direction that threatened LANL. LANL was closed to all but essential personnel and the City of Los Alamos was evacuated. The Las Conchas Wildfire was the largest in New Mexico history, at approximately 124,000 acres. A significant threat to human health and the environment due to this huge wildfire was radioactive material release from legacy sites within LANL, where soil is contaminated with radioactive isotopes. A firestorm within the wildfire could have entrained the contamination and moved it offsite.

- Concerns: Significant concerns about the impact of the Las Conchas Wildfire on LANL and potential releases of radioactive waste and materials into surrounding communities, including tribal communities, prompted emergency response operations from EPA Region 6. The response team devised and implemented air monitoring and sampling efforts to protect communities surrounding LANL, including several pueblos, the cities of Los Alamos and White Rock, and National Forests and Monuments.

- Emergency Response: EPA Region 6 rapidly assessed the wildfire landscape and coordinated closely with the New Mexico Environment Department, EPA's Radiological Emergency Response Team, and several pueblos to determine optimum locations to deploy 12 air sampling stations and coordination of ASPECT monitoring missions around the perimeter of the fire.

- Air Sampling: Six rounds of air sampling, with 56 individual samples from private, public and tribal lands, were collected during the response. The rapid response and air sampling effort ensured the timely notification of air quality data to citizens.

- ASPECT: EPA Region 6 coordinated ASPECT monitoring missions around the perimeter of the fire, which included several potentially impacted cities and tribal lands. All data was expedited and analyzed in order to inform the public as fast as possible that no radiation levels significantly above background levels were detected.